UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/1997/88
30 June 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Substantive session of 1997
Geneva, 30 June-25 July 1997
Item 6 (c) of the provisional agenda*

COORDINATION, PROGRAMME AND OTHER QUESTIONS: INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF INFORMATICS

Report of the Secretary-General

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INTRODUCTION

1. The present report summarizes actions taken by the United Nations Secretariat to implement Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/35 on the need to harmonize and improve United Nations information systems for optimal utilization and accessibility by all States. In paragraph 8 of that resolution, the Council requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its substantive session of 1997 on the follow-up action taken on the resolution, including the findings of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics. The primary focus of the resolution is the expanding needs of delegations and Member States to obtain data that the United Nations and its specialized agencies have or plan to have in a format that can be accessed electronically by Member States.

I. AD HOC OPEN-ENDED WORKING GROUP ON INFORMATICS

2. In accordance with the provisions of Council resolution 1996/35, the Working Group was requested to continue for one year to address the issue of how Member States could be provided with unhindered access to United Nations data. As mentioned in the previous report of the Secretary-General (E/1996/81), the principal vehicle for delivery of information products will continue to be the Internet.

3. The Working Group has continued to address the need to make United Nations information more easily accessible electronically to permanent and observer missions, and to ensure that all missions can easily connect to the Internet to obtain United Nations data. The Working Group has continued to promote the use of the Internet as the basis for the future development of information services to Member States. This coincides with the policy established by the Information Systems Coordinating Committee (ISCC) of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, which has recommended that the United Nations and its specialized agencies use the Internet for information exchange and dissemination. The Secretary-General, in addressing the Working Group, indicated his strong commitment to improving services to Member States.

4. At its meetings, the Working Group continued to concentrate on issues that relate to the provision of more effective electronic access for Member States, (see E/1996/81, para. 6).

II. ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE SECRETARIAT AND THE UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME IN RESPONSE TO CONCERNS RAISED IN THE WORKING GROUP

5. The Director of the Information Technology Services Division within the Office of Conference and Support Services of the United Nations Secretariat has served as the focal point in addressing issues related to the provision of information in electronic format to Member States. The United Nations Secretariat, together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has continued to operate dedicated help desk facilities for permanent and observer missions, which handle any technical problems that might be encountered in using

database services provided by the United Nations. In addition to actions taken by the United Nations Secretariat, UNDP has nearly completed its initiative to provide Internet connectivity to all permanent and observer missions in New York. This initiative will be completed and managed on a continuing basis by the United Nations Secretariat. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) provides similar services to permanent and observer missions located in Geneva.

A. Facilitating information access and dissemination to missions in New York

6. During 1996 and at the beginning of 1997, approximately 80 permanent and observer missions were assisted by UNDP in establishing connections to the Internet. By June 1997, all the missions were provided with the means to access the Internet.

7. Consistent with its efforts to ensure maximum and reliable connectivity for missions, UNDP has proportionately increased its access equipment and connectivity infrastructure. During the past year, digital telephone lines have been introduced, and the number of telephone dial-in ports increased from 27 to 63. The ratio of one access port for every three missions has been maintained. By comparison, the largest Internet service provider in the United States maintains a ratio of only one access port for every 20 users. In order to focus more effectively on developmental activities (as described below), UNDP and the United Nations Secretariat are in the process of transferring the support of New York-based missions to the Secretariat, as mentioned in paragraph 5 above.

B. Facilitating information access and dissemination in country locations

8. As a result of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, UNDP has been financing the Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) to promote access to and the sharing of information and expertise among all sectors of civil society. SDNP complements human networking by electronic networking, using appropriate new communications and information management technologies ranging from bulletin boards to electronic mail and full access to the Internet at the country level. One of SDNP's objectives is capacity-building. The UNDP Capacity 21 programme is one of the SDNP prime sources of financing for 16 national projects.

9. To date, some 30 country-specific centres are operating in all regions. One of these is a regional project in the South Pacific which will form part of the recently inaugurated Small Island Developing States Network for the Alliance of Small Island States. Other national nodes operate in Central America, the Baltic and the Caucasus. Another important activity arose from the Declaration of the Summit of the Americas, held in Bolivia in December 1996, which calls on UNDP/SDNP to assist in the establishment of a hemispheric network for sustainable development.

10. A $5 million project to promote the introduction and utilization of information and communications technologies in support of sustainable human

development at country locations was approved by UNDP at the end of 1996. In an effort to foster programme development, the project is intended to provide assistance to Governments in devising national strategies and tools for the information sector. It will also offer advice on policies related to information technology. Special emphasis will be placed on capacity-building, enabling Governments to take full advantage of the possibilities of information technology. A related project, which puts into operation a strategy to harness the development potential of new information and communications technologies for sustainable human development, has been formulated for the Asia and Pacific region.

C. Electronic dissemination of United Nations information via the United Nations Internet Web server and other related Web facilities

11. The United Nations and all the specialized agencies now provide information on the Internet. The information available on the United Nations Web server has been substantially revised, with a new multilingual Home Page introduced in September 1996. The substantive departments provide information on the United Nations site, under the guidance of an interdepartmental working group on Internet matters, which is coordinated by the Department of Public Information. This group, set up in 1995, monitors the development of the Home Page and works to ensure that guidelines on electronic publishing and posting on the Internet are followed.

12. The new design of the Home Page has permitted the inclusion of nearly all areas of interest relating to the United Nations, with links to the other Web sites system-wide. Many new areas of interest to the United Nations community have been added to the site. The search facility has been extended to incorporate full-text search of press releases, documents and other databases.

13. In particular, access to the optical disk system through the Internet, which received considerable interest, was provided to the permanent and observer missions and the Secretariat. Most official United Nations documents have been made available in the six official languages of the Organization. Additional access has been established directly from the Home Page to documents of the General Assembly (with a new interface), the Security Council and reports of the Secretary-General. The United Nations Reform page was created in coordination with the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and posted simultaneously with the Secretary-General's announcement of reform measures in March 1997. A page for the special session of the General Assembly on Agenda 21 and the Home Pages of the regional commissions were also created. The CyberSchoolBus, developed as a learning tool for students and teachers, has been particularly successful.

14. The number of databases has been expanded to include, in particular, the Monthly Bulletin of Statistics, the United Nations Treaty Series, UN-I-QUE (a reference file created by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library), InfoNation (statistical information on various indicators of United Nations Member States) and databases on landmines.

15. United Nations press releases have now been moved from the obsolete mainframe format to the United Nations Home Page, where they are much easier to obtain in a timely manner. Daily briefings and daily highlights are also available. Constant situation reports provide up-to-date information on crises and emergencies, which are particularly valuable for relief agencies and similar organizations. Information on meetings of various United Nations bodies is now posted regularly, including the Journal and the Daily List of Documents.

16. A user survey was prepared in both printed and electronic formats and sent to all permanent and observer missions to assess their evaluation of the Home Page and to better respond to their needs. The replies were compiled and served to identify areas in need of additional attention.

17. Under the auspices of ISCC, the United Nations System Web Locator became operational, and the United Nations International Organizations Network Search (UNIONS), a search engine for improved retrieval, was launched while still under development.

18. The United Nations has been striving to make full use of the opportunities provided by the Internet. For the first time, the Secretary-General took part in a live international broadcast carried on the Web, with questions originating from different parts of the world.

19. The range and scope of electronic information available on the United Nations Home Page expanded significantly during the biennium 1996-1997. In 1996, the United Nations Home Page received a total of 11,547,365 accesses from a wide range of countries. The United Nations Internet presence is an important channel of communication, not only for the permanent and observer missions and capitals of Member States, most of which are now connected, but also for institutions and the public at large.

D. The optical disk system

20. The optical disk system, begun in 1988 in Geneva and extended to New York in 1992, continues to play a vital role in the electronic distribution of United Nations documentation to Member States. The system contains all United Nations documents produced in Geneva and New York since 1993 (the forty-eighth session of the General Assembly) in all six official languages. It also cont ins all resolutions and decisions of the four main legislative organs of the United Nations. Access to the system is currently available to permanent and observer missions via digital telephone dial-up lines using the Integrated Service Digital Network (ISDN) technology or via the Internet.

21. The Secretariat has implemented a pilot project wherein all documents stored in the optical disk system can be retrieved using an Internet browser. In order to ensure that Member States have unimpeded Internet access to documents on the system, connections have been limited initially to permanent and observer missions. Progressively, service will be extended to governmental offices in capitals. In later phases of the project, if enough excess capacity is available, service may be extended to other users (research institutions,

non-governmental organizations and other public organizations) and the public at large.

E. Provision of electronic mail to permanent and observer missions

22. The remote use of the United Nations electronic mail network by permanent and observer missions allows missions to communicate with the United Nations, with UNDP offices worldwide and with each other. The facility also allows missions to send mail to and receive mail from any individual or organization that has an Internet address. Permanent and observer missions can now access the United Nations electronic mail system using an Internet browser, rather than having to log into the United Nations electronic mail network as a separate function.

F. Specialized Internet training given to the staff of missions

23. In order for Member States to utilize Internet services for their own dissemination of information, the Working Group requested that the United Nations Secretariat continue its practice of providing training courses for permanent and observer missions on use of the Internet, with an emphasis on Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), the coding language for documents. Most mission staff are now proficient in the use of standard Internet programs for Internet access and many have created Web pages for their respective missions. At present, 1,139 mission personnel have received such training.

24. In addition to the training programme described above, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library continues to offer CyberSeek training to delegates and staff of permanent and observer missions. This training, conducted in one-hour sessions, focuses upon retrieving and downloading relevant information from the Internet, with particular reference to sources important to international organizations. The Secretariat also offers training sessions in the use of the optical disk system.

G. Internet publishing (home pages) for missions

25. With regard to Internet publishing (home pages) for missions, UNDP has provided technical support and host facilities for those missions wishing to publish their own Web pages. Twenty-seven missions have now taken advantage of the facilities and over 30 megabytes of host space have been dedicated for their use. It has been noted that UNDP has only limited capacity to perform this service and that, as a field-based organization, it is providing these services slightly outside its normal mandate. Efforts are under way to transfer the responsibility for supporting the missions' home pages to the United Nations Secretariat by the end of 1997.

H. Databases and information available on CD-ROM

26. A considerable amount of information is currently available on CD-ROM and any permanent or observer mission that has a computer with a CD-ROM drive (standard on most recent models) can access valuable United Nations data. A number of CD-ROMs and electronic products are available from the Sales and Marketing Section of the Department of Public Information, which also maintains lists of other electronic products available from various offices of the United Nations. Many CD-ROM databases and on-line information services are currently available from the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, both at the External Collection Reference Desk and in the Woodrow Wilson Reading Room.

III. USE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES BY PERMANENT AND OBSERVER MISSIONS: VIDEOCONFERENCING PLANS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

27. A videoconferencing capability has been in place at United Nations Headquarters since the beginning of 1996. The United Nations Offices at Geneva and in Vienna have acquired videoconferencing equipment. In the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999, the United Nations Secretariat is proposing to provide major duty stations with an appropriately configured videoconferencing network.

28. The Secretariat will propose a gradual introduction of this technology that will allow monitoring of its use and the related costs. Videoconferencing initiatives will be coordinated to avoid duplication of installations and to ensure the optimum utilization of the equipment in place. An ISCC task force will issue guidelines related to inter-agency use of videoconferencing technology.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

29. The Secretariat expects that expansion of electronic information services that are available to Member States will continue during the biennium 1998-1999. Additional United Nations information will be made available under the guidelines established by the interdepartmental working group on Internet matters. Now that universal access to missions is becoming a reality, the focus of the development of services to Member States is expected to shift to the expansion of the information base to include significantly more information that will aid in the area of sustainable development. The Secretary-General's remarks to the Working Group clearly indicate the extent to which he believes that the initiatives in this vital field should be continued.

Annex

SUMMARY OF INFORMATION SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE UNITED NATIONS TO PERMANENT AND OBSERVER MISSIONS OF MEMBER STATES

Service class	Service	Requirements	To obtain service contact
General assistance	General inquiries regarding services to Member States		United Nations focal point 963-6439
Internet access	Access to United Nations Web/Gopher servers for all United Nations information	Standard telephone line/modem Access software	United Nations focal point 963-6439
Internet retrieval	CyberSeek: training sessions in retrieval and downloading Internet information	Internet access	United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library focal point 963-8861
Electronic mail	Direct connection to United Nations internal e-mail network	Standard telephone line/modem E-mail software	United Nations e-mail coordinator 963-5387
Optical disk system	Connection to optical disk system for all United Nations official documents	Internet access	United Nations optical disk coordinator 963-6586 or 963-6587
Optical disk system retrieval	Training sessions in retrieval and downloading from the optical disk system	Optical disk system access	United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library focal point 963-7415
CD-ROM services	United Nations data in CD-ROM format	CD-ROM drive	United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library focal point 963-7415